

Youngest Theater Organist



The world's largest theater organ console has four keyboards.

***Robbie Irvin is a 15-year-old
Atlanta movie-house music man***

By Paul Jones

ROBBIIE Irvin of College Park, Ga., at age 15 has achieved a couple of rare distinctions.

Not only does he rank as America's youngest professional theater organist, but he also gets paid to exercise an instrument other musicians might give their best hemidemisemiquaver to try — the monumental, world-famous pipe organ in Atlanta's Fox Theater.

Moreover, Robbie, a bright and handsome 10th grader at College Park High

School, knows exactly what he's got his hands — and feet — on.

The greatest console of any theater organ in the world, for one thing. For example, the Fox organ's "storm" effect simulated a heavy rainstorm, with thunder and wind. "This effect can literally rock the theater," Robbie said.

The organ not only simulates saxophones, clarinets and trumpets, but can produce such unusual effects as "the song of birds," a T-Model Ford horn, or, via tuned chimes,



Four years ago Robbie Irvin, staff organist for Atlanta's Fox Theater, began learning how to make the instrument produce such sounds as "aeroplane," bird songs, church bells and T-Model Ford horn, and even a "phantom piano."

church bells. One stop, or key, is marked "aeroplane," an old-fashioned spelling for a still contemporary sound.

In short, Robbie reigns over one of the world's most elaborate consoles. The Fox organ is a great, awesome sound factory; an instrument of such infinite potential, such fascinating complexities, that it well might throw a musician far more experienced than Robbie into a real tremolo.

ROBBBIE Irvin, however, doesn't mind venturing. Why should a young man feel intimidated by the theater world's most immense organ, after all, when he also happens to be one of the nation's youngest glider pilots?

Robbie's extraordinary friendship with the Fox organ began four years ago. If it seems incredibly audacious for a 15-year-old musician to approach such an instrument, then imagine Robbie at the huge console at age 11 ... a small lad who'd had no musical training whatever.

Joe Patten, a neighbor of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Irvin, Robbie's parents, inadvertently introduced the boy to the Fox instrument. Robbie and Patten had developed a close friendship, and one Saturday morning the youngster inquired where Patten went on weekends. When Robbie learned Mr. Patten customarily spent that time working on the Fox organ, the boy begged to go along.

Joe Patten at first felt reluctant to take him. Working on the massive organ meant scaling a 60-foot ladder to reach up, up, up into the five vault-like chambers that house

the thousands of large and small "instruments." It seemed no place to take a boy.

At last Mr. Patten relented, however. He decided to allow Robbie to help by pressing keys on the four keyboards, so he could tune the 32 tones on the console. The console at that time dwarfed the youngster.

At first Robbie was content simply to press and hold the keys while Patten, way up behind the side walls of the theater, made the acute adjustments which would give the organ its perfect pitch. Then Robbie began to pick out phrases of songs he liked. Patten could see the boy obviously had musical talent.

Bob Van Camp, who had played the organ as staff organist for the Fox Theater, heard about Robbie. Bob, who is music director for WSB-Radio and one of the most popular disc jockeys in the South, began teaching Robbie. Occasionally he featured the boy on his concerts for a solo or two at the organ, especially when there were large numbers of young people in the theater.

Robbie learned quickly. He played several numbers at a kiddie matinee in 1970, when he was 14. "He has a keen ear for music and has developed rapidly," Bob Van Camp said.

THE young musician displays a real flair for showmanship, and arranges all his weekend shows. "When we have a Disney film or others that appeal to young people I try to make the show as contemporary as possible," Robbie

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Triangles, castanets and a phantom piano

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said, "When we play a film like 'My Fair Lady' I try to make the show more sophisticated."

Interestingly enough, there is no music written for theater organ. Robbie says he simply listens to radio a lot, memorizes the music and transcribes it for the organ. During his shows he uses no sheet music, but plays everything from memory.

PRESENTLY he's transcribing Leonard Bernstein's recording of the score from "West Side Story" for the theater organ. Robbie says the Bernstein version has interesting variations on the original-cast album. Besides, Robbie's a Bernstein fan.

During the past two years Robbie has studied with Lee Erwin, who played organ for the old Moon River radio series. One of America's foremost theater organists, Erwin flew to Atlanta for weekend instruction with Robbie at the Fox keyboard. And Robbie has flown to New York for weekend lessons.

A theater organ, Robbie explained, is very different from an electrically operated church organ. In addition to the pipes found in church instruments the Fox organ, operated by tremendous wind pressure, has hundreds of stops no church organist ever would need.

Besides the birds, windstorms and auto horn, there are other unusual sound effects. The vault-like chambers contain actual drums of all sizes, as well as triangles, castanets and other percussion instruments. Robbie likes to show all this off to visitors.

The Fox organ also has something else none other has — a "phantom piano," a gold-painted baby grand which sits

in the middle of the orchestra pit. Joe Patten rigged this so Robbie can play it from the keyboard of the organ, making it appear some ghostly musician is at work.

Mr. Patten has tuned organs since he was 14. At that time he sang in the church choir at his home near Tampa, Fla. He liked to stay after choir practice and hear the organist play jazz. The organ broke down one day and Joe Patten found nobody knew how to repair it. He did the job himself and has been at it ever since.

About 10 years ago Mr. Patten restored the Fox Theater organ to its original state. It had deteriorated from not being used. Since then he has tuned the organ at least twice a year — an assignment that requires four or five weekends. He accepts no pay.

"It's my hobby," he explained.

Robbie and his friend Joe Patten work well together. Both have spent so many hours in the chambers, studying the operation of the great organ, that they understand the intricate instrument well. Robbie has come to know the organ's backstage operations as well as he knows the keyboard.

They have much affection for the Fox Theater organ. Both boast it has the "most magnificent sound" of any instrument of its kind, largely because the music is not blocked by some architectural blunder. The chambers, hidden by a series of louver doors in each side of the organ in the front of the orchestra pit, open right into the main auditorium.

Robbie says you should sit in the balcony in order to get the full impact of the organ. Most of the sound emerges on a level with the middle of the Fox Theater balcony.



Robbie is one of America's youngest glider pilots.